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Raciolinguistic ideologies as experienced by racialized academics in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

English remains a language of power in post-apartheid South Africa, providing access to goods, services, social status, and is indexical to White privilege. Raciolinguistic theoretical perspectives postulate that if “standard” English is used by racialized individuals, they are stigmatized as “language deficient” and have fewer opportunities for inclusion and upward social mobility. In this study we examined the dynamics of raciolinguistic ideology and linguistic inequalities at work. Thematic analysis of interviews with 18 racialized academics produced several themes indicating that these individuals need English to succeed but that they are also marginalized based on how they speak it. We argue that raciolinguistic ideologies in higher education should be addressed to create a more inviting atmosphere for academics of color.

1. Introduction and problem statement

People of color (people considered not “White”) are racialized individuals who are disadvantaged owing to a lack of (a) dominant language (e.g., English) proficiency, and (b) access associated with socioeconomic-related services (e.g., schooling and employment; [Kalunta-Crumpton, 2020](#); [Vidal-Ortiz, 2008](#)) in multiracial spaces. They are subjected to raciolinguistic ideologies (i.e., the role and relationship between language and race) that inform their marginalized experiences ([Alim, 2016](#)). According to [Frideres \(2015\)](#), White people fail to racialize themselves. Rather, they “function within the boundaries of what they consider as the human norm” (p. 43), while they racialize others. Raciolinguistics critiques how people of color are marginalized vis-à-vis Whiteness and the use of so-called standard languages. In doing so, the field seeks to better understand and explain what this means for the racialized speaker ([Flores & Rosa, 2015](#)). These ideologies produce what [Flores and Rosa \(2015\)](#) term “racialized speaking subjects” (p. 150), who are deemed incompetent and nonstandard in their English by White listeners, even if they are proficient. However, this is not an issue that is limited to English-speaking societies. Some studies demonstrate that even in Europe, raciolinguistic ideologies are alive and negatively impact the racialized dominant language speakers ([Corona & Block, 2020](#); [De Costa, 2020](#); [Perrino & Jereza, 2020](#); [Tebaldi, 2020](#); [Thoma, 2022](#)). History shows that there is a preference for the mainstream society, which then tends to isolate those whose ethno-racial and sociolinguistic backgrounds do not conform to the linguistic standard (cf. [Tankosić & Dovchin, 2021](#)). Higher education, being a microcosm of the greater society, encompasses racialized speakers and raciolinguistic ideologies (see [Huo, 2020](#); [Mayuzumi, 2015](#); [Sterzuk, 2015](#)). However, further research on raciolinguistic ideologies in higher education in varied contexts is needed ([Kubota et al.,](#)

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The notion of raciolinguistic ideologies and the racialized body is prominent in European (e.g., Perrino & Jereza, 2020; Vigouroux, 2017), North American (e.g., Rosa, 2016b), South America (e.g., Roth-Gordon) and Australian (e.g., Dovchin, 2020; Oliver & Exell, 2020) literature. Within the African context, a non-Western setting, there is some, albeit little, evidence of the existence of raciolinguistic ideologies in South Africa (e.g., Ndhlovu, 2019). This is particularly interesting, given South Africa's past of apartheid, a system of legalized race- and language-based oppression.

This study contributes to a growing body of knowledge by making use of raciolinguistics to highlight the interconnectedness of race and language (Ramjattan, 2019), specifically how English instills and maintains inequality in the South African higher education system by privileging Whiteness and its linguistic landscape and continuing to disadvantage Blackness accordingly. South Africa has 11 official languages—nine indigenous languages spoken as a mother tongue by the majority (Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu) and two colonial (Afrikaans and English). However, during apartheid, the latter two held equal official status at the national level (Lombard, 2017). Today, the country uses English as its de facto language both in broader society and its institutions of higher learning (Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2021; Ngcobo & Barnes, 2021). Indigenous languages, although official, do not enjoy a similar status and thus are not commonly used in higher education and commerce, whereas the use of English in these settings is unmatched.

Racialized academics (i.e., academics of color who have been subjects of bias or marginalization in a higher education context, owing to their race)—and racialized students—are thus required to speak English in order to succeed (Ngcobo & Barnes, 2021; Rudwick & Parmegiani, 2013). However, they may not be fully equipped linguistically to thrive in these spaces and therefore incur negative attitudes and criticism (Kubota et al., 2021), which may cause feelings of inferiority (Dovchin, 2020). In a similar fashion to Rosa (2016b), we argue that White South African academics and students may perceive Black South African linguistic proficiency as inadequate and not in keeping with the racial and linguistic standard they wish to experience (Subtirelu, 2017) and thus worthy of ridicule, even though there are many World Englishes.

Given that English has permeated societies across all continents through either imperialism or globalization, it has become a global language that no longer solely belongs to England (Kayman, 2004). While this infiltration was initially problematic, as it was violent, today people choose to speak it out of their own volition. So much so that recent statistics show that English is the most spoken language in the world with 1,268 billion speakers (Statista, 2019). However, the notion of World Englishes suggests that there is no one English but many different Englishes and that nobody has exclusive rights to it (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). English is localized to its setting (Bolton, 2005); nevertheless, there is no common South African English (Botha et al., 2021). In a context such as this, there are multiple South African Englishes and raciolinguistic ideologies at play.

Thus, global languages such as English present challenges to racialized speakers' sense of self and the ways they are treated by others in their everyday lives and professions (Dovchin, 2020). Exactly how is what this paper aims to explore.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2014), non-native speakers of English in the academic setting continue to be discriminated against as their efforts towards professional respect and progression are undercut. They report stereotype threat, worry about loss of status for being in the out-group, and cognitive fatigue owing to conversing in a foreign language (Kim et al., 2019). Yet studies relating to this phenomenon in the higher education setting are few and far between, which potentially makes this appear to be a non-issue. This underscores the importance of the current study, which will highlight how linguistic discrimination may occur in higher education.

To this end, we sought to answer the research question: How do racialized academics relate to the use of English in institutions of higher education in South Africa? We examined the lived experiences of 18 racialized academics through semistructured interviews. The study contributes to the body of literature on raciolinguistic ideologies, albeit confined to the South African context.

1.1. Racialized bodies, raciolinguistic ideologies and racialized ideologies of languagelessness

According to Bourdieu (1991), the Marxist tradition underscores the political meanings of "symbolic systems" (p. 166). Symbolism expresses individuals' basic feelings, judgements, and ideas (Austin, 1977) and is produced relative to the interest of the dominant group in the form of ideology. In this world, racialized bodies are subject to raciolinguistic ideologies and perceived by the audience to possess linguistic deficiencies (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017). They are seen as incompetent in their use of a dominant normative language not because they are communicatively inadequate but because of the stigma associated with their race (Flores & Rosa, 2015), thereby delegitimizing the racialized individual altogether (Rosa, 2016a, 2016b). This is what Rosa (2016b) termed "languagelessness." Veronelli (2015) terms this notion the "coloniality of language," explaining that the past and present practice of racialization (or the assigning of racial character to a thing, an action or a people; in this case, English and the non-native speakers of that language) tends to perpetuate the thinking that they have no language or, specifically, no ability to express themselves in a manner that is of value or acceptable to White native speakers of that language, thereby marginalizing the racialized individual.

For example, Lippi-Green (2012) maintains that accent discrimination may produce racial inequalities in different areas of life. Findings by Piller (2016) support this notion, conveying that language can be a role player in ongoing structural racism in arenas such as education and employment. Examining raciolinguistic ideologies can therefore help us understand colonially imposed differentiations across racially stratified groups (Rosa, 2019).

There are other facets to these raciolinguistic ideologies. A racialized individual may still be perceived as deficient, even if they engage in normative or innovative linguistic practices similar to those of their White counterparts (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This is because comparable language practices are esteemed differently, depending on racial demographic of the individual engaging in these practices (Rosa, 2016a).

Dominant-group-serving ideologies tend to be presented as collective interests that are universally shared (Austin, 1977). As such,

as audiences, racialized individuals can also perpetuate raciolinguistic ideologies by marginalizing other racialized speakers. This is true when they internalize and adopt existing racist raciolinguistic ideologies learned while attending school with, learning from, and socializing with White people and use these to ridicule other racialized individuals who do not conform to the internalized norms. Raciolinguistic ideologies therefore can influence whether a racialized individual wants to identify with a nondominant group (Chaparro, 2019) and how individuals evaluate themselves, others, and the decisions emanating from this evaluation.

Racialized speakers can also perpetuate these ideologies within their own linguistic practice. Roth-Gordon (2016) wrote about the concept of racial malleability and how racialized individuals can abate negative perceptions about themselves based on skin color by assimilating to linguistic Whiteness. This racial malleability is not about trying to be White, but is rather a momentary linguistic practice that serves to diminish the stigma associated with their race at that point in time.

All of these aforementioned practices demonstrate, first, that racialization is an ongoing everyday process in contexts where different populations coexist (Omi & Winant, 2015). Second, they exemplify how unequal power brings about ideologies that shape how language is conceived and valued by society at large, including in the workplace (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Subtirelu, 2017), in the case of this study, higher education. Lastly, they show that raciolinguistic ideologies use language to show racial difference as well as the converse: that race influences linguistic practices and ideologies (Alim, 2016).

Another raciolinguistic ideology sees English being used as a way to determine intelligence for racialized speakers. Racialized individuals who are fluent in English and speak it with the same accent as White speakers tend to come from a good schooling background and close proximity to their White counterparts. As they tend to speak alike, they are thus looked upon favorably. English proficiency puts individuals on the road to academic success (Masasi, 2012). However, given an oft-deficient schooling system, many racialized students emerge with poor reading and communication capabilities in English (Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020), which invariably impacts their future schooling, work prospects and economic success. This language deficiency can be explained by differential access to linguistic resources, including literacy, language varieties, codes and jargon, causing condensed repertoires (Blommaert, 2005). However, this lack of capability in English is not attributable to a lack of intelligence; it is merely the case that one's education in English is deficient, and suggesting anything else thus perpetuates harmful raciolinguistic ideologies.

1.2. The current study

South Africa differs from other postcolonial countries in that a European presence has remained (Mesthrie, 2021). Even as a minority, it remains a dominant group or in-group and is socioeconomically superior. Although race and class each play a role, neither alone can account for the nature of social formation in South Africa and its association with power and privilege (Soudien, 2004). Here, racialized individuals still experience and witness its impact through socioeconomic, racial, and language inequality (Korgen, 2017). In this context, raciolinguistic ideologies thrive, given the irrefutable links between linguistic and social disparities (Collins, 2017). This study serves to bring these to the fore with particular reference to higher education.

Institutions of higher learning are microcosms of greater society where language and race are constantly at play against the background of history. With the dawn of democracy in South Africa, racialized academics have been able to enter historically White institutions and carry out their scholastic endeavors while interacting with academics and students, albeit all in English (and Afrikaans). Given the inherent language and power differences found between these groups of people, these interactions have raciolinguistic implications. Against this background, to answer the main research question (How do racialized academics relate to the use of English in institutions of higher education in South Africa?), the following specific questions were formulated:

- How does the use of English impact the racialized academic?
- How does the racialized academic respond to the use of English?
- How do others respond to the racialized academic as a result of their English use?

2. Research design

2.1. Research philosophy and strategy

In this study we followed a qualitative research design and analysis. Since we wanted to understand the experiences of racialized academics as they encounter and live through raciolinguistic ideologies, the orientation most suited to the study aims was phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals as they live through a particular phenomenon. Participants' viewpoints and experiences are grounded in the relativist and interpretivist paradigms. The meanings derived were relative to the contexts and personal values of the participants (Ryan, 2018).

2.2. Research setting and procedure

Permission to conduct the study was attained through Tilburg Research Ethics and Data Management Committee (REDC 2020.135). Before consenting, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any point without explanation or consequence. Their data were kept confidential. Participants were sampled from five South African universities that were historically White institutions through either English or Afrikaans as medium of instruction. This would imply that there is some legacy of past exclusion through demographics, social language use, and language policy. This was so that we can extrapolate the experience of people of color in that setting. The first author sourced the participants through the respective university

pages on Google Scholar. Academics of color were identified and sent an email inviting them to participate.

2.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to source participants. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Participants had to be academics of color, use English in their day-to-day academic activities, and work with White academics and/or students. A total of 58 academics of color were approached, and 18 were interviewed for this study. We reached data saturation at 15 participants and saw no new themes emerging from the data (Given 2016) but sampled a further three participants for certainty. Racialized academics in South Africa are broadly defined as Black, Colored (persons of mixed racial descent), or Indian, sharing a past of marginalization. The Colored and Indian groups were included because, when compared to Black academics, historically, they share a similar struggle. In the emerging themes, they shared similar points of view, for example, they are advantaged by English but are embarrassed by what they felt was an inferior knowledge of the language. So it seemed their race played a central role in their experiences with the English language. Table 1 shows the biographical data of the participants. Female academics accounted for 59% of the sample, and 67% held a PhD. With a self-rating of at least 6 out of 10, they all perceived themselves to have above-average proficiency in English.

2.4. Data gathering

Semistructured interviews were deemed to be the most suitable, as they allow the researcher to ask a set of predetermined questions with the ability to probe for clarity where needed (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). To answer our research questions, we asked interview questions such as “What purpose does English serve in life and work?” and “How does having to operate in English as an academic of color impact you?” The interviews took place online during 2021. Only the participant and first author, as PhD student, were present during each interview. Interviews were audio-recorded. One participant made a special request to rather provide written responses to the questions, which she emailed to the first author. She was not available to answer further clarifying or probing questions.

2.5. Data analysis strategy

We transcribed the interviews using Amberscript¹ software and then cleaned and quality-checked the transcripts. We analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis steps. The first author read and reread the transcripts to familiarize herself with the data. Data were then coded using the comment function in MS Word. Once the entire transcript was coded, data were transferred into table format using DocTools and then into MS Excel, where, as part of the fourth step, the themes were developed. These themes were derived from the codes. After themes were identified, they were revised by combining some and collapsing others. Final theme names were given, which were unique and distinct from one another, and each helped answer the research questions.

2.6. Rigor

Rigor and trustworthiness were crucial throughout the research process. Peer debriefing took place when the authors regularly met to debrief on general progress, theory, and methodology choices. Through reflexive bracketing, we had to be aware of our positionality as researchers within the study so that we could minimize the influence of our own experiences and viewpoints on the study outcomes (see Brown, 2006; Cypress, 2017). This was especially important, given that the first and second authors are South African academics of color. We kept an audit trail through meticulous record keeping of the interview schedule, raw data, data reduction and analysis notes, and reflexive notes. Lastly, we sampled purposefully by ensuring the participants had the desired experience and characteristics that would enable them to meet the study objectives, and we made sure we reached data saturation in the data-gathering phase (see Forero et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

3. Findings

The thematic analysis process yielded seven themes pertaining to the racialized academics' lived experiences with the English language, as relating to the specific research questions. Each theme presented in the text should be read in conjunction with the evidence provided in Table 2.

Theme 1: Enablement of achievement in academia

This theme was concerned with how the English language empowered the racialized academic to acquire, carry out and succeed in their academic work. One participant stated:

First of all, I wouldn't have employment by you if I wasn't able to express myself in English from an interview point of view. So I had to express myself in English. Therefore, that's the reason why I got employed to get this opportunity to be a lecturer. (Mandla)

The academics perceived that their English abilities had given them a leg-up in securing work, and without it, obtaining scholarly opportunities would not have been possible. They noted that neither their own indigenous languages nor lower levels of English

¹ Amberscript complies with GDPR regulations.

Table 1
Characteristics of academics.

No.	Pseudonym ^a	Gender identity	Ethnic identity	Home language(s)	Highest qualification	Position	English Proficiency ^b
1	Dineo	Female	Black	Tswana	Master's	Lecturer	9
2	Cindy	Female	Colored	English	PhD	Senior lecturer	8
3	Sipho	Male	Black	Swati	Master's	Lecturer	7
4	Puleng	Female	Black	English	Master's	Lecturer	8
5	Keneilwe	Female	Black	Sepedi	PhD	Professor	6
6	Thabiso	Male	Black	Sotho, English	PhD	Associate professor	7
7	Noxolo	Female	Black	Xhosa	PhD	Associate professor	7
8	Nothando	Female	Black	English, Tswana, Shona	PhD	Senior lecturer	8
9	Mandla	Male	Black	Zulu	PhD	Lecturer	6
10	Lebogang	Male	Black	Tswana, Zulu	PhD	Lecturer	7
11	Thembaletu	Female	Black	Zulu, Tswana	PhD	Lecturer	7
12	Luke	Male	Colored	English, Afrikaans	Master's	Lecturer	7
13	Njabulo	Male	Black	Zulu	PhD	Lecturer	7
14	Prinesh	Male	Indian	English	PhD	Senior lecturer	10
15	Anaishe	Female	Black	Shona, English	PhD	Associate professor	10
16	Yasmeen	Female	Indian	English	Master's	Lecturer	9
17	Thokozile	Female	Black	Zulu	PhD	Lecturer	10
18	Lesedi	Female	Black	Sotho	Master's	Lecturer	8

^a Pseudonyms assigned based on participants' home language.

^b Self-rating of English proficiency from 1 to 10, where 10 is excellent.

proficiency would have afforded them the same opportunities. Thus, speaking English is therefore seen as an imperative for academic success and a tool of access for the academics—affording them the ability to access opportunities that are only available to those who can cross the English proficiency barrier. The access gives them a platform to prove their capabilities once on the inside. Often their audiences, that is, students and other academics, are people who themselves have had to learn to speak English for their own ends, and so the academic space is a meeting of people using English to advance their own career endeavors.

The academics noted that their very job in academia, where they are required to teach, produce research, and engage other academics in meetings and conferences, would not be possible without the ability to express themselves in English. Yasmeen noted that *“English is an advantage in my job, because when you have to write articles and converse with international academics, I mean English. If you know English pretty well, it works in your favor.”* It is this proficiency that affords them privilege—the privilege to succeed in a space in which others not possessing similar linguistic ability would not be able to work and thrive.

Theme 2: Advancement on the social hierarchy

This theme describes how English allows participants to move up the social ladder. Participant Noxolo surmised, *“If tomorrow I were to say I'm doing anything in Xhosa, I will just move back and reverse instead of going forward. I think English is what is moving me up.”* Having obtained work and succeeded as an academic, the participants felt they had moved up the social hierarchy. Similar to the notion that their indigenous languages would not afford them opportunities, here they felt that using them would actually set them back in their careers and thus negatively affect their social standing. To them, indigenous languages do not hold the same socioeconomic value as English—the participants cannot make a living with other languages and would thus be prevented from advancing socially.

However, this was not a sentiment shared by all the participants. For others, the benefit of English was only partial. Even with upward social mobility and all things being equal, the White in-group would still not see them as equal. Other participants felt that English had not favored them at all. *“I think I can't say I am on that hierarchy, even now, being the Head of Department,”* noted Keneilwe. Despite holding a position of power and being able to speak English, she believed that this was still not enough in her social environment, as her race remained a factor that determined her position on the social ladder—her race dictates that she is at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Theme 3: Loss of sense of self

This theme details the degree to which having to operate in English diminished the participants' sense of self. This theme speaks to how the academics may or may not lose a sense of themselves in the process of having to speak English every day at the expense of their own mother tongues. All of the academics had something to contribute to this theme.

“I don't think I am fully who I am,” stated Thembaletu. First, many of the academics felt that they had a diminished sense of self from having to speak English and not being able to bring their whole selves, including their culture and mother tongue, into the academy. The academics wanted to be able to display their badge of culture at work, but (linked to the preceding themes) this is not possible. For some this prolonged exposure to English and subsequent weakened identity at work meant that they were losing more and more of themselves. Others felt that having to speak English does not diminish their identity at all. Thabiso felt that the question of sense of self is the incorrect one. What we should rather be looking at is the person's value and what they bring into the organization.

Table 2
Themes emerging from data.

Research Question	Theme	Data-driven definition	Evidence from data
How does the use of English impact the racialized academic?	Enablement of achievement in academia	Degree to which English enabled the participants to acquire, carry out and succeed in their academic work	<p>"I was able to get this job, I don't think I will be here if I couldn't speak English because I wouldn't be able to go to class and teach" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"First of all, I wouldn't have employment if I wasn't able to express myself in English from an interview point of view. So I had to express myself in English. It's the reason I got this opportunity to be a lecturer" (Mandla)</p> <p>"It has potentially given me the opportunity to actually lecture because again, if I'm breaking English, how is my audience going to understand what I'm trying to say?" (Dineo)</p> <p>"I do my work in English, publish in English, teach in English." (Prinesh)</p> <p>"English opens up opportunities. You'll be able to write articles in English and be recognized as a researcher around the world because of English" (Mandla)</p> <p>"I think English is an advantage in my job, because when you have to write articles and converse with international academics, in English. If you know English pretty well, it works in your favor" (Yasmeen)</p> <p>"It has been a direct [benefit] in terms of me doing certain things that are expected of an academic like studying, doing research, interacting with people, traveling and so on" (Thabiso)</p>
	Advancement on the social hierarchy	Degree to which English allowed participants to move up the social ladder to varying degrees	<p>"If tomorrow I were to say I'm doing anything in Xhosa, I will just move back and reverse instead of going forward. I think English is what is moving me up" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"It has definitely moved me up. People don't take people who speak African languages seriously" (Thembaletu)</p> <p>"It does to a certain extent. Maybe not to the top, but I think I think it does move it a step or two" (Sipho)</p> <p>"But they will never see you as an equal or better than them" (Sipho)</p> <p>"I have moved up the ladder because of how I write though there is room for improvement" (Lebogang)</p> <p>"With certain eloquence comes class" (Cindy)</p> <p>"It hasn't done that much" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"I think I can't say I am on that hierarchy, even now, being the Head of Department" (Keneilwe)</p>
	Loss of sense of self	Degree to which having to operate in English diminished the participants' sense of self	<p>"[A person's] value system would be more important than language describing someone's sense of self" (Thabiso)</p> <p>"It impacts my sense of self so bad. I cannot be myself, my self-identity is not English, my self-identity is Zulu" (Mandla)</p> <p>"I don't think I am fully who I am" (Thembaletu)</p> <p>"I think I am losing myself" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"I think as you grow a little bit older, you realize that your identity and your culture becomes a bit more important" (Sipho)</p> <p>"I don't get the same pride that maybe as a younger person I would have had like, 'oh, I can speak English'. I don't see it as something to be that proud of" (Sipho)</p> <p>"Well, for me it's important because I don't want people to lose who they are simply because they have come to the university" (Thabiso)</p> <p>"It does not impact my sense of self. It does not change the fact that I am Tswana or Black" (Lebogang)</p>
	Decline in psychosocial well-being	Degree to which having to speak English caused anxiety, embarrassment, and feelings of inferiority	<p>"There's that element of just being angry, you know, like, of not wanting to be a victim of the fact that I can't speak English as well as I would have wanted to" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"I am missing, maybe to a certain extent, a little bit of confidence, just a little bit, especially if I'm in a setting where I need to speak English and I need to articulate myself clearly" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"So it just ends up creating this anxiety whenever you have to talk" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"So you just end up doubting yourself" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"I can't say inferior, but you can maybe feel a little bit, maybe embarrassed if you are not at that level" (Cindy)</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Research Question	Theme	Data-driven definition	Evidence from data
			<p>"I just wonder how people are going to perceive me. Will they perceive me as not being able to speak properly, especially because the most obvious part of my job is to speak? So you just wonder, like, these people must think this guy is a fraud or whatever" (Cindy)</p> <p>"When you look at a White person, already you feel inferior. When we look at them, immediately, psychologically, you think that they are superior and then we don't have that confidence because nothing is expected out of you. So when you have to present, already you get scared" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"When I was done, everyone clapped for me. And I'm like, are they joking? Is it for me? So I guess not believing in ourselves and also never being told that you know [your stuff], we always have that thing that I don't know it and I'm not good enough" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"I did not mix with people who were fluent in English for the fear of being exposed" (Lebogang)</p> <p>"I mean I get invites to go overseas to present. Most of them I reject because I'm like, 'well, I must go and speak English'" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"When I finished my master's, I was doing my PhD. One lecturer would say, 'did you have an opportunity to go overseas? I will show you how to apply'. But because I never had confidence that I can go overseas because I don't know English, I never took that opportunity" (Noxolo)</p>
How does the racialized academic respond to the use of English?	Employment of speech enhancement	The degree to which participants modified their speech to conform to the White standard	<p>"Never!" (Thokozile)</p> <p>"Not for me. I didn't I couldn't do that. I refused. I refused to change my accent" (Keneilwe)</p> <p>"If I have to go an extra mile of changing my accent, then I would just have to look for a coffin and bury myself" (Keneilwe)</p> <p>"My point of view is that I should be able to express myself but not imitate someone else. As long as my point is clear and it is understood by that particular person that I'm speaking to. But I think for me it is fine but not imitate someone else" (Mandla)</p> <p>"I think right now I'm really at a point where pronunciation doesn't matter that much in my life. And how I say certain words really doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it sounds more English or not, because the way I'm speaking English stems from how we get accents, they come from our native tongue" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"But I don't actively work on trying to change, you know, things like accent. I don't have the resources and the time to work at that now so I'm trying to just communicate clearly and stay true to the, you know, the rules and requirements of using the language" (Luke)</p> <p>"...My words are much more pronounced now at work and are much clearer... And the words are pronounced the way they are supposed to be pronounced... there's a difference in terms of the way the world to pronounce and the way you speak English. It's not to Anglicize it or to make it white. It's just that you speaking it the way it should be spoken" (Prinesh)</p> <p>"English is not our mother tongue but we must do it justice by speaking it the way English speakers speak English" (Yasmeen)</p> <p>"Because I didn't go to these fancy school schools, I don't have an accent, you know, an English accent. At a certain point in my life, I tried to mimic these fancy accents" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"Then I realized, let me just be as articulate as I can" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"I don't think it's just the English, it's also the way you speak it. I have mastered the twang and I know who's in the room and when I know who's in the room. I'm like, yeah, I am going to twang it to this degree for this audience" (Lesedi)</p> <p>"The way I speak English even now I know opens a lot of</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Research Question	Theme	Data-driven definition	Evidence from data
How do others respond to the racialized academic as a result of their English use?	Association of English with intelligence	The degree to which participants perceived others to believe that English is a sign of intelligence	<p>doors because I am quite a charismatic speaker so I know the opportunities given to me by the head of department to speak at events and to facilitate training would not happen otherwise" (Lesedi)</p> <p>"English being almost used as a weapon, or sometimes they refer to it as a measure of intelligence, right? Yeah, people believe that the better English you speak, the smarter you are" (Nothando)</p> <p>"They look smart because of English" (Sipho)</p> <p>"English has always been that language to show how smart you are" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"A Black person can do what they can do but because they know that because of the language issue, they don't expect anything good from us. Actually, it's actually not nice" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"Well, there is a dynamic with white people, right. So if you can speak very good English, they seem to, I don't know if respect is the right word, I think that's too strong a word. But still. They seem to regard you as, 'oh, she's one of the intellectual brown ones' kind of thing. So that's the vibe that I get from them" (Yasmeen)</p> <p>"I've had to convince myself that not being 100 percent in my expression in English doesn't translate to me being dumb" (Njabulo)</p>
	Expression of ridicule and judgement	The degree to which all race groups judge and deride the English-speaking style of the participants	<p>"So you just have to say in class 'English is not my first language,' so if they want to laugh at you, it's OK to accept it and live with it. It is crazy that that would be an issue, because this is Africa and we know that we don't all start off with English" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"How you speak English, people would judge you or, you know, they would have that idea of thinking, I am not sure about this lecturer" (Noxolo)</p> <p>"We receive so many complaints of White children who are saying to their mothers, the lecturers don't know English. And I call them to say, this is Africa... If you are in Africa we speak like this" (Keneilwe)</p> <p>"The disadvantage of not being very good in English was the fact that if ever I made a grammatical error whilst I'm teaching, the first people that would start laughing, unfortunately, will be our African brothers and sisters" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"But what's even crazier is when ourselves as Black people are kind of like waiting on each other's mistakes when it comes to expressing ourselves in the English language" (Nothando)</p> <p>"But now I teach mostly Black African students with few white people and a few Indian people. But I think I've alluded to this earlier, that you find Black students which are literally white in the way they conduct themselves. They are friends with white people. They speak like white people. They are not going to be interested in interacting with you that much" (Njabulo)</p> <p>"We take in so much of this backlash from other demographics, especially, let's say, white people, and then convince us that a certain African accent is difficult to understand" (Nothando)</p> <p>"I just wonder how people are going to perceive me. Will they perceive me as not being able to speak properly, especially because the most obvious part of my job is to speak? So you just wonder, like, these people must think this guy is a fraud or whatever" (Cindy)</p> <p>"We had a meeting the other time and then this other lecturer was joking that because they are online now, the students write more on the chat function. He made a joke about how they write nonsense. And it felt like he was saying it to me. I wanted to cry. How can you say that when a child is struggling and you say they are writing nonsense, that you don't even understand that English they write? And then everyone laughs. This whole thing is so painful. Our children are so disadvantaged, actually" (Noxolo)</p>

Lebogang, an avid proponent of being able to speak English in today's world, felt that his sense of self was untouched by the prevalence of English in his life: "It does not impact my sense of self. It does not change the fact that I am Tswana or Black." Lebogang believed that his identity and sense of self were not tied to having to engage the academic world in English. Rather, he will maintain his culture and Blackness regardless of the system in which he works.

Thabiso brought up the issue of students' owning their sense of self when they enter the academic space. He stated, "Well, for me it's important because I don't want people to lose who they are simply because they have come to the university." For him, they should not have to leave their identity "at the door" in order to participate in academia, and they need to bring themselves fully into the experience.

Theme 4: Decline in self-confidence/emotional well-being/psychosocial well-being

This theme uncovered how living through raciolinguistic ideologies and having to speak English as a racialized academic may cause anxiety, anger, embarrassment, feelings of inferiority, and a decline in self-confidence. Noxolo had just finished her master's studies when she was approached to apply for an overseas PhD opportunity:

When I finished my master's, I was doing my PhD. One lecturer would say, "did you have an opportunity to go overseas? I will show you how to apply". But because I never had confidence that I can go overseas because I don't know English, I never took that opportunity. (Noxolo)

Noxolo's experience demonstrates the inextricable link between English proficiency and confidence in a world that demands English in exchange for success. Noxolo's lack of self-confidence came from believing that in order to succeed as an academic overseas, she had to speak English, an ability she did not believe she had (to a high enough degree). She may not have realised that not all scholars who produce knowledge in English are articulate in English. Her belief that she was unable to pursue possible career opportunities blocked her from doing so. Her English abilities have not changed much, but today she is a prolific scientist and associate professor with numerous publications and invitations to edit books and host international workshops. However, she still turns down opportunities that require her to engage in English.

Other academics alluded to the notion that having to speak English in front of those they believe have a better command of the language chips away at their self-belief. When they believe they cannot articulate themselves as expected, this creates anxiety, self-doubt, and self-consciousness. Some academics' anxiety went deeper, as they spoke of being exposed or viewed as a fraud, even though they were performing well. "I did not mix with people who were fluent in English for the fear of being exposed," said Lebogang. It is as if not being able to express themselves in English delegitimizes them as academics and their achievements, even against evidence to the contrary. Multiple academics linked this trepidation to inferiority and found it difficult to process accolades given to them because they felt undeserving based on their English capabilities, even though they produced praiseworthy work.

Theme 5: Employment of speech enhancement

This theme concerns whether racialized academics attempted to improve their speech to conform to a White standard. There was a range of beliefs regarding how academics should speak the language, ranging from being steadfast in not changing their speech to being adamant of its necessity.

Many of the participants did not subscribe to this behavior. "If I have to go an extra mile of changing my accent, then I would just have to look for a coffin and bury myself," said Keneilwe. The type of language around the reasons for not enhancing their speech was emphatic, such as "Never!" (Thokozile) and "I refused" (Keneilwe), suggesting that this was an act of rebellion against what participants perceived to be a push towards conformity and a threat against the sense of self (raised in an earlier theme). Nothing could make them change their speech. Other academics advanced the idea that people should be more accepting of individual differences in speech because pronunciation should not matter, given that individuals speak differently based on their geographical background and mother tongues. For others still, speech enhancement was more nuanced. It was about ensuring that one gets the message across clearly to facilitate understanding but should not amount to imitating how another group speaks. Observing the rules of English was important as a means of respecting the language and being effective in communicating.

When the academics did partake in speech enhancement, it usually occurred when they were younger and was short-lived. One academic, however, admitted to still engaging in it. Lesedi stated that she was always aware of her audience and modified her speech accordingly:

I don't think it's just the English, it's also the way you speak it. I have mastered the twang and I know who's in the room and when I know who's in the room. I'm like, yeah, I am going to twang it to this degree for this audience. (Lesedi)

Additionally, there was an awareness that with this type of speech enhancement comes perks, hence the continued use thereof.

Theme 6: Association of English with intelligence

This theme is concerned with the misconception that English is a sign of intelligence—the less fluent an individual is, the less intelligent they are. Most of the academics mentioned this as a belief they were aware that society held. An interesting thing to note about English being an indicator of intelligence is that it is a defensive statement often made by a racialized speaker when they or another racialized speaker has not mastered the language and has incurred judgement from another. Yasmeeen discussed this ideology by stating:

Well, there is a dynamic with White people, right. So if you can speak very good English, they seem to, I don't know if respect is the right word, I think that's too strong a word. But still. They seem to regard you as, "oh, she's one of the intellectual brown ones" kind of thing. So that's the vibe that I get from them. (Yasmeeen)

This excerpt demonstrates that the "default setting" for how a racialized individual may be perceived by others is "unintelligent until proven otherwise," where "otherwise" denotes "proficient in English." However, participants dismissed the validity of this notion,

as one can appear to be intelligent simply because they can articulate themselves well—this is the privilege that English affords people. One can come from a racialized group, speak an indigenous language well, and be skilled in their field of expertise, but because they cannot express themselves as eloquently in English, they will not enjoy the benefit of being perceived as intelligent.

Njabulo was once convinced of this ideology relating to English and intelligence himself, but has since re-evaluated his position on it. He said, *“I’ve had to convince myself that not being 100 percent in my expression in English doesn’t translate to me being dumb.”* What Njabulo’s experience may demonstrate is the extra work that racialized academics require to convince themselves of their worth. The participants believed that ideology is on display in academia in how racialized academics and students are perceived.

Theme 7: Expression of ridicule and judgement

This theme is oriented around how the participants were mocked for their English-speaking abilities. Keneilwe related, *“We receive so many complaints of White children who are saying to their mothers, the lecturers don’t know English. And I call them to say, this is Africa... If you are in Africa we speak like this.”*

Some academics were met with negative attitudes owing to how they speak English. They found themselves in a position of having to defend themselves against the laughter of students and accept this as the status quo. For them, it was a curious thing because there is not only one way that English is spoken in the country, given people’s diverse backgrounds, and so it should be expected that some academics are not going to speak the language in the same way that students grew up speaking it. Not everyone in South Africa starts with English as a home language. However, some students were disquieted enough about the academics’ English to report it to their parents, who then complained to the university. A perspective advanced was that Black people have been convinced that their accents are too difficult to understand, which perhaps justifies their being reported, rather than the speaker of “standard English” making the effort to understand an accent different to their own. With this ridicule comes the notion that the manner in which the academic articulates themselves in English determines their competence and invokes their worry of being perceived as a fraud.

It is interesting to note that Black students were often the perpetrators of deriding the academics. The academics felt that the Black students had become so acclimatized to the way that their White counterparts think and feel that it also offends them when they hear a Black person speaking English with an othered accent. This results in their not being interested in engaging with the academic inside or outside of classroom.

Noxolo relayed a story about how racialized students were mocked in meetings by the White academics:

We had we had a meeting the other time and then this other lecturer was joking that because they are online now, the students write more on the chat. He made a joke about how they write nonsense. And I was it felt like he was saying it to me. I wanted to cry. How can you say that when a child is struggling and you say they are writing nonsense, that you don’t even understand that English they write? And then everyone laughs. This whole thing is so painful. Our children are so disadvantaged, actually. (Noxolo)

What this excerpt demonstrates is that it is not only students and their parents who perpetuate raciolinguistic ideologies, but fellow academics. The concern here is that academics are meant to nurture and show care and understanding towards students, but instead, they extend the conception of their inadequacy to other academics, which is met with laughter by way of agreement. While the main theme of this evidence serves to show how academics in the in-group ridiculed racialized students, their utterance was layered: How could they justify making a comment that derides racialized students in the presence of other academics of color?

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand the raciolinguistic dynamics at play for racialized academics in South African universities pertaining to speaking English. The findings reinforce existing literature (both within and outside of raciolinguistic ideology theory), brought novel insights, and overall, advanced the understanding of raciolinguistic ideologies in a non-Western context. The findings, through the lens of the objectives, revealed first that raciolinguistic ideologies impact the racialized academic both positively and negatively. Second, the study uncovered that to mitigate the impact of these ideologies on themselves, they can respond by either engaging or refusing to engage in speech enhancement. Lastly, others’ response to them depends on how well they can speak English. People make judgements about their intelligence based how they speak English, and ridicule the racialized academics. The findings are discussed in the context of three broader theories, relating to social hierarchies, language anxiety, and the sociocultural identity theory of second-language learning.

When it comes to the impact that raciolinguistic ideologies had on the academics, it was clear that the academics could be both advantaged and disadvantaged by speaking English. As an advantage, the academics were able to advance in academia and, by extension, advance on the social ladder. For most of the academics English was not their mother tongue, but they had to turn to English for economic survival and advancement. This notion is supported by Roberts (2013), who demonstrated that skills alone are often not adequate for securing work, but rather, English (as the dominant and official language in the universities) needs to accompany these skills to access employment and advance in this space. Soler’s (2019) study investigated linguistic privilege and career trajectories of early-career scholars in Sweden. He found that scholars chose to publish their work in English for greater exposure in the international research community and access into top-tier journals, an overwhelming majority of which operate in English. Although this reasoning resonates with the academics in the current study, a unique dilemma also exists in South Africa in that most, if not all, local journals publish in English anyway. There are no journals that publish works in any of South Africa’s indigenous languages (cf. Kamwendo, 2014), partly because these languages have not been sufficiently developed for scholarly use. Doing so would in any case not give the racialized academic access to the international scholarly community and would thus maintain and exacerbate a system of marginalization, obscurity, and debasement for the racialized academic.

Again, much like the respondents in Soler’s (2019) study, most of our respondents felt that they were not as fluent in English as they

were in their mother tongues, which, in turn, requires them to put in more effort to get similar results to their White English-speaking counterparts. This effort invariably gives rise to achievement, which leads to improved economic position and thus upward social mobility. The issue of English providing a means to upward social mobility is one that has been delved into by [Weber \(2014\)](#), who writes about the instrumentality of English, that is, a means for people from disadvantaged communities to climb the social ladder. Although this process may marginalize indigenous languages, it is a risk worth taking ([Vaish, 2005](#); [Weber, 2014](#)). According to [Vaish \(2005\)](#), economic freedom is indeed an important item on the decolonization agenda, as it enables poor people to partake in the economy and be lifted out of poverty. In other words, the racialized academic's process of fulfilling their responsibilities requires them to immerse themselves in English while simultaneously abandoning their mother tongue (which has minimal utility in this setting) and move one step closer to an equivalence of Whiteness on the social hierarchy. According to [Berger \(1977\)](#) and [Webster & Hysom \(1998\)](#), group identities such as race can aid or limit status attainment. Even within the group, characteristics such as language or speech ([Barth, 1998](#)) allow people to organize themselves based on shared norms and values, where some are able to attain privilege and others remain of a lower status. Ultimately, whether right or wrong, it is clear that if one wishes to advance in South African higher education and thus society, English is a non-negotiable.

This brings us to the disadvantages of speaking English as a racialized academic in the South African context. Being able to work and prosper only if they could speak English was a pain point for the academics, as they felt a loss of sense of self in speaking more English than their mother tongue, speaking English better than their mother tongue, or having their mother tongue sidelined by English. To the best of our knowledge, this was a unique finding in the context of raciolinguistic literature. The questions here are why one's sense of identity should be lost in pursuit of economic gain and whether the two can mutually coexist. Even though the prospect of upward social mobility may be appealing, people may still be attached to their identities. In countries where groups of people have experienced oppression and hegemony, very little can be more important than decolonization and the embracing of one's own indigenous culture and identity.

In order for racialized academics to participate in the academic endeavor and create credible knowledge, and for self- and career competence and preservation, this should be encouraged. Where necessary, academic departments should help upskill racialized academics while the matter of decolonization in higher education continues to be attended to.

Language anxiety seemed to characterize the participants' engagement with and in English. [Alamer and Almulhim \(2021\)](#) investigated the relationship between language anxiety and self-determined motivation. This is in line with [Horwitz et al. \(1986\)](#), whose study, although conducted among students, demonstrated that language anxiety is social, psychological, contextual, and proficiency related in nature, and is associated with learning a new language or communicating in a language that one is unfamiliar with. In such instances, non-native speakers tend to avoid situations where they have to interact with native speakers as they fear they may conform to negative stereotype that the native speaker may have of them ([Kim et al., 2019](#); [Spencer et al., 2016](#)). Their findings are transferable to the racialized academics in our study. Some participants feared communicating when they thought they would be judged by important stakeholders. Seemingly, this was due to the belief that they might fail, which produces anxiety. As [Hashemi \(2011\)](#) pointed out, such anxiety may be produced as a result of the speaker's position in terms of race in comparison to the audience ([Gardner, as cited in Horwitz & Young, 1991](#)), that is, brought on by the speaker's social status and the racial power dynamics at play between the racialized speaker and their audience. As a means of alleviating their own anxiety, racialized academics can outwardly acknowledge what they believe to be a linguistic shortcoming and point out, as one participant did, that English is not their mother tongue, but they will do their best within their linguistic repertoire to communicate for good understanding. This serves to take away the anxiety's power, and they may proceed to make their contribution in the lecture, meeting, or conference.

Lastly, others responded to the academics' use of the English language in various ways. According to the academics, society tends to associate proficiency in English with intelligence—the better one's English ability, the more intelligent one is. This relationship has not been discussed extensively in the context of raciolinguistic ideologies. Literature suggests, however, that a person's intelligence can be called into question based on in-group favoritism triggered by accents outside the norm ([Bresnahan & Kim, 1993](#); [Bresnahan et al., 2002](#)), which can lead to bias (in the form of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination) against the out-group, linked to impressions of intelligence ([Lindemann, 2003](#)). A person will be deemed more intelligent if their accent conforms to the in-group, and they will thus gain favor with the in-group.

The participants seemed to have an internal conflict between having advanced as academics through English and losing their sense of selves in the process. This has resulted in the inability to live as they want or choose ([Beehler, 1990](#)), giving rise to feelings of imposterism and not fully being able to be who they are. In keeping with [Wang \(2021\)](#), the racialized academics felt a close connection with their own heritage and language, which are used as an identity standard against which to “evaluate the authenticity of second language identity” (p. 2). The context for the current study may not be a language learning environment as much as it is an institution for higher learning, but [Peirce's \(1995\)](#) sociocultural identity theory of second-language learning still applies. For Peirce, social identity multidimensional, a site of struggle, and can be constructed and reconstructed over time. As such, the academics have one identity at home and another at the university, and these identities cause an internal struggle about who they can and cannot be at work. They can choose to shape this to fit their desired identities and goals through mechanisms such as speech enhancement. Peirce posits that second-language speakers, much like the academics in this study, cannot be blamed when they do not take up space and use their voices, as they may perceive themselves as having no “right to speak” based on existing power relations, such as raciolinguistic differences. It is therefore important for leaders in these spaces to be aware of raciolinguistic ideologies at play and create a space to allow for all voices in the room to contribute by asking “are there any views that differ from what has been shared?”, which gives the racialized academic legitimacy to speak their truth.

Failure to verify a second-language identity to attain a sense of self can lead to negative outcomes. According to identity theory, identity verification is related to self-esteem. When this is threatened, having a strong sense of self is not possible, and thus, one's self-

confidence, and by extension, well-being, are harmed in a similar fashion to our participants. If the academics cannot form a second-language identity, this hinders their ability to form social bonds with others (Wang, 2021).

Ridicule and judgement faced by the racialized academics had undertones of discrimination. Literature on raciolinguistic ideologies speaks of racialized speakers being viewed as deficient (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Studies have shown that speakers with racialized accents were deemed unsuitable for certain client-facing jobs (see Creese, 2011). Certain accents in client-facing work, such as lecturing, often lead to discrimination (Creese, 2011). Similarly, Timming (2017) demonstrated that in Western societies, Western accents are preferred over those of racialized individuals for employment purposes, thereby raising the question as to whether accent can be used as a proxy for racism. When it comes to speakers of a nonstandard or a variation of English, Lippi-Green (2012) has shown that language can be used to discriminate and subjugate others in much the same way as was done to the racialized academics when students complained to the department or their parents about the lecturer's speech. The expectation was for the racialized academic to be removed and replaced with someone whose speech was more palatable or who had a more Western-aligned accent. As Lippi-Green (2012) explains, accents must pass through what she terms "language ideology filters" (p. 73). If they are deemed unacceptable, the dominant group (represented here by White academics, White students, and other racialized students with "White" accents) can reject the racialized academic and the responsibility to engage with them (Laurence, 2013).

4.1. Practical implications

This study confirmed the existence of raciolinguistic ideologies in higher education in South Africa, which has implications for the racialized academic (and student). Firstly, it is necessary for the university leadership to prioritize the questioning, denaturalizing and dismantling of the injustices brought on by raciolinguistic ideologies that marginalize racialized academics (Lo, 2020). Given the psychosocial implications of the study, this can be achieved through having difficult conversations, facilitated by sociologists and psychologists, across employee race and language lines, where the antecedents and consequences of raciolinguistic ideologies are elucidated. In so doing, an inclusive, less hostile, more inviting atmosphere that fosters well-being and flourishing will be created for all who work and learn in these institutions (Adams et al., 2020). As previously explained, raciolinguistic ideologies are not studied in the South African context.

Secondly, the sense of self and way of being of racialized academics needs to be legitimized and accepted. This entails students and academics alike being sensitized to their implicit bias when it comes to speech and accents that do not resemble the preferred White standard, even when the academic is competent and knowledgeable in their fields of interest. One way to achieve this is through senior White allies who recognize the marginalization of racialized academics championing their racialized colleagues' sense of self and work in formal and informal work conversations.

4.2. Limitations and recommendations

The current study had its limitations. First, though we had participation from five key historically advantaged universities in South Africa, voices are missing from a key institution that has been in the spotlight in recent years for an ongoing language/raciolinguistic debate. Racialized academics in that space may have had unique contribution to make; however, there was a lack of response from the scholars who were approached. Second, our study was qualitative and thus cannot be generalized to other academic contexts, some of which are historically disadvantaged with an overwhelming majority of racialized academics and students, yet still have the presence of a White minority. It is important to investigate how raciolinguistic ideologies manifest in these contexts.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lusanda Sekaja: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Byron G. Adams:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Kutlay Yağmur:** Conceptualization, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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